
Racial Oppression in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*

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Abstract:

Whites' oppression of American Indians can be classified into three stages: military genocide, religious assimilation, and commercial exploitation. In Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*, it can be found that military genocide remains a haunting memory for Native Americans, that white religion has led the Native American youth into bewilderments and functioned as a disguise for the abusive actions, and that commercial exploitation has become the current way of seizing benefit from Native Americans, reflecting the whites' racial stereotype upon Indians.

Key Words: Racial oppression, Military genocide, Religious assimilation, Commercial exploitation

1. INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the whites' coveting of natural resources and their established racial discrimination, Native Americans have been oppressed by whites for centuries. The oppression can be classified into three stages: military genocide, religious assimilation, and commercial exploitation. This article aims to study the representation and features of the three stages with examples from *Reservation Blues* by the promising American Indian writer Sherman Alexie (1966-). It can be found that military genocide remains a haunting memory for Native Americans, that white religion has led the Native American youth into bewilderments and has functioned as a cloak for whites' abusive actions, and that commercial exploitation has become the current method of seizing benefit from Native Americans.

2. MILITARY GENOCIDE

Historically, the Euroamericans levied war on the American Indians and committed genocide, claiming that Indians were savages and that they had impeded the progress of the white civilization. As the colonizers moved westward, they occupied Indian land and usurped Indian resources. When Indians resisted, the authority sought military conquest. The important battles were Sand Creek (1864, when 200 Cheyenne and Arapaho people were killed, most still sleeping) and Wounded Knee (1890, when about 200 Lakota Sioux men, women, and children

were killed by the U. S. Cavalry). As an impact of the historical events, Native Americans now are still constantly haunted by the atrocities.

2.1 Military Conquest in History

The ultimate purpose for military conquest was for the land and resources that the Indian owned. Actually, actions had been taken long before Wounded Knee. President Andrew Jackson implemented the Indian Removal Act in 1830, and many Indian tribes in the East were herded toward the western territories, where they were corralled on reservations, land that are not suitable for farming. On the famous “Trail of Tears”, “from October 1838 through February 1839 some eleven to thirteen thousand Cherokee walked nine hundred miles in bitter cold from the southeast to Indian Territory. One fourth died or disappeared along the way” (Glancy, 1996: 61). The rich Cherokee farm land was confiscated for white settlers and the Cherokee moved to Indian Territory, which is now Oklahoma.

After the Civil War, the whites seized Indian land even more recklessly, and the new waves of immigrants impacted the Indians greatly. The new territorial acquisitions (Between 1830 and 1860, within thirties years, the United States doubled the amount of territory under its control with the addition of a few states: the Oregon country, California, Texas, and the borderlands of southern New Mexico and Arizona, which were part of the Gadsden Purchase) coincided with the arrival of European and Asian immigrants who hoped to join the flood of Americans heading to the American West. The discovery of gold in California in 1849 and the promise of land for cultivation and settlement presented attractive opportunities for those willing to journey westward. The seizure of these new territories strengthened federal use of land, and the flux of immigrants disturbed the lives of the American Indians.

In the 1860s, treaties, such as the Fort Laramie treaties (Larson, 1978: 11), restricted Indians from hunting buffalo, and while the whites were killing large numbers of buffalo, thousands of Indians were starved. The European settlers, when they first landed on the new continent, met with warm welcome from the Native peoples, but soon they began slaughtering them. Within a couple of hundred years, the number of North American Indians had reduced from about 30 million to a few million (Zou, 2004: 40). The Dawes Allotment Act, passed in 1887, was supposed to protect Indian land rights, but in actuality was used to usurp Indian land, by making individual Indians into landowners, regardless of their traditional communal land ownership. By 1934, Indians had lost three quarters of their reservation land.

2.2 Haunting Historical Memory

In Alexie’s (1995) *Reservation Blues*, the military genocide remains a haunting memory. Centuries of oppression has physically mutilated and diminished Indians, as the repenting George Wright, a record company agent, “saw the faces of millions of Indians, beaten, scarred by smallpox and frostbite, split open by bayonets and bullets. He looked at his own white hands

and saw the blood stains there” (p. 244). In other words, historical atrocities have been haunting Native Americans ever since.

The author has Sheridan, the then general who oppressed the American Indians and the now Record company agent, recount his killing of a pregnant Indian woman:

I remember once, he said, when I killed this Indian woman. I don't even know what tribe she was. It was back in '72 [1872]. I rode up on her and ran my saber right through her heart. I thought that was it. But she jumped up and pulled me off my mount. I couldn't believe it. I was so angry that I threw her to the ground and stomped her to death. It was then I noticed she was pregnant. We couldn't have that. Nits make lice, you know? So I cut her belly open and pulled that fetus out. Then that baby bit me. Can you believe that? (p. 237)

White military atrocity presents itself here. With the imbalance in power between the two sides, the Indians fight but cannot avert the result of being oppressed and slaughtered. The military is the national machine to suppress Indian uprisings, but Sheridan proclaims brazenly that “The U.S. Army was the best friend the Indians ever had” (p. 236). Then Sheridan blames Indians for the killing: “You could never stay where we put you. You never listened to orders” (p. 236). He also ascribes the failure of the audition to Coyote Springs members themselves: “You blew it by acting like a bunch of goddamn wild Indians” (p. 236).

Again, racial bias makes whites believe that Indians are uncivilized and incapable of anything, and that they cannot control their fate. Whites expect Indians to be obedient and subservient, and they prettify their colonial rule and military oppression by saying that the US military is the best friends to Indians. When Indians are wronged and given a bad name (the accusation that they blew the opportunity), they are helpless.

2.3 The Metaphorical Reenactment of Military Oppression

Sheridan's attempt to rape Checkers is a reenactment of the century-old white-Indian relation. The white mainstream society is mainly formulated into a male image, whereas the Indians are abstracted into a female image. The attempted rape scene epitomizes the Caucasian oppression and dominance over the Indians.

Whites had been coveting Indians and their resources for centuries. They have the greed to usurp what they desired: “Sheridan studied Checkers. He had watched her during the last few centuries. She was beautiful... And black, black hair that hung down past her shoulders. Sheridan wanted to touch it” (p. 237). White people have power, especially with the support of military. Alexie displays Sheridan's power metaphorically: “Sheridan paced around the room, lit a cigarette, and waved it like a saber” (p. 236). It is probably the same saber that Sheridan uses to kill the Indian woman in the afore-mentioned example.

The bodily struggle between the white record company agent Sheridan and the Indian band singer Checkers is a metaphor for the military assaults the white army had dealt the Indians.

Sheridan abuses Checkers by trying to break the strong-willed girl with physical violence. He slaps Checkers hard to make her acknowledge his authority and superiority, but Checkers refuses and demonizes him by calling him Dracula and liar:

Do you believe in me now? he asked.

You ain't nothing, you ain't nothing.

I'm everything.

You ain't much at all. You're just another white guy telling lies. I don't believe in you. All you want to do is fight and fuck. You never tell a story that's true. I don't believe in you. (p. 241)

Physical abuse cannot establish Sheridan's authority. Though asserting that he is everything, Sheridan cannot force Checkers to acknowledge his "omnipotence".

3. RELIGIOUS ASSIMILATION

After the Indians were subdued and disabled militarily, the Government and the Church began to assimilate Indians in the Judeo-Christian culture. They robbed the parents of their children, dumping the children into white adoptive families or boarding schools, forcing them to dress and behave in white ways, forbidding them to speak their native languages, and pressuring them to relinquish their native religions. As a result, many young Indians were cut off from their traditional culture and virtually lost. They are deceived into believing that the Indians are inferior and dying out. They are also abused due to the conception that they are inferior.

3.1 Severance from Native Religion

Many Native American writers depict confused Indian youths who have suffered from obscured identity, most of which cases are caused by the influence of the Church. Such characters are usually prevented from acquainting their own religion and culture because of the interference and inhibition from the Catholic Church on the reservations. A good example of this type would be Abel in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. They would have to undergo plenty of transformations and sufferings before they can reconcile with their native religion, rituals, and value orientation, so as to regain a complete identity.

The youths in *Reservation Blues* are exactly like this. They scorn their own religion, are influenced by mainstream media, and tempted by fame. Alexie wishes to show "how fragmentation affects full-bloods" (James, 2000: 48). He describes the separation of tradition from modern Indian life and the problems concerning identity hence induced. Victor Joseph and Junior Polatkin are not keen on tradition. They often pick on the representative of the Spokane tradition, Thomas Builds-the-Fire. They are always drunk. They spend their prize money on drinking. They do not take Big Mom very seriously: "'Shit', Victor said. 'She thinks she's a medicine woman'" (p. 203). Actually, Victor is not the only, or the first, one to question Big Mom's authority. "Many of the Indian men who were drawn to Big Mom doubted her abilities. Indian men have started to believe their own publicity and run around acting like the

Indians in movies [sic]" (p. 208). These men, including Victor Joseph, think that they are warriors. They often dismiss Big Mom's admonition or precept by saying "You jus' a woman" (p. 208). Tradition, as is represented in *Reservation Blues*, has been marginalized, with Big Mom living on the Wellpinit Mountain.

As can be seen from above, "Separation from culture, family, and land doesn't necessarily occur from being off the reservation and not knowing tribal heritage; it can also happen within the boundaries of the reservation" (James, 2000: 48).

These youth fight their own kind when there is no other target. They chase or attract white women as proof for their machismo. "[T]hey long for white women as trophies or as a form of revenge against white men" (Grassian, 2005: 102).

The Indian youth are virtually lost. Victor is tempted by fame and economic profit, so he sells his soul to "the Gentleman", which is Satan, the source of evils, at the price of his best friend Junior. He could not control the guitar. On the contrary, the guitar controls him. It is the "Gentleman" who makes the guitar play beautiful music. When Sheridan decides that "Victor Joseph is really quite extraordinary on the lead guitar [and that he] is original and powerful, a genuine talent" (p. 190), it is very ironical since the music is all the guitar's, having nothing to do with Victor. As they have the audition in Cavalry Record's studio, Victor is very nervous, and his fingers slip, and the guitar "bucked in his hands, twisted away from his body. He felt a razor slice across his palms" (p. 225). The guitar renders Victor great skills but also ruins the audition. It is Victor's desire for fame and money that makes him more individualistic, forgetting the improvement and welfare of the reservation. In a way, the entertainment industry "perverts the minds and identity of contemporary youth" (Grassian, 2005: 98). When groupies, Betty and Veronica, make the deal with Cavalry Records, they sacrifice "their identities and desire to play their own music" (Jorgensen, 1997: 21). Similarly, when Junior sells his soul to the "Gentleman", he has forgotten the progress/future of the reservation.

Victor's dependence on the magic guitar mars his career. The ideal model for a new warrior should be relying on his own effort and the warrior's good wish for communal interests. Individuality does not fit in the Indian culture in this case, for it is not for the community's good.

3.2 Dissipation of Confidence

Religion has brought white popular culture, value, and bias upon the Indian youth, which spreads the message that the Indians are a dying race. White writers (such as James Fenimore Cooper and William Faulkner) depicted romantic and stereotyped images of Indians. White popular culture, represented by Hollywood, has been displaying a doomed race. American Indian youth, as a result, have lost confidence in themselves.

In Native American literature, this atrocity is interrogated and criticized. Louise Erdrich, in her (1993) *Love Medicine*, depicted Nector Kashpaw's brief career in Hollywood in the chapter

entitled “The Plunge of the Brave”: “‘Clutch your chest. Fall off that horse,’ they directed. That was it. Death was the extent of Indian acting in the movie theater” (cited in Cox, 1999: 234). The director tries to make Nector Kashpaw play his own death in front of the twenty-first century white audience. Nector explains, “[T]he greater world was only interested in my doom” (ibid.). Former actor Archie Fire Lame Deer supported Kashpaw’s words in his biography,

Every few seconds, one of us had to fall off his horse, pretending to be shot by the soldiers and settlers. They paid each of us twenty-five dollars for falling from a horse at a dead run; otherwise, we got only ten bucks for a full day’s work. (ibid.).

It is obvious that Hollywood is only interested in the death of Indians and wants audiences also to believe in the cinematic narrative of conquest and disappearance of the “primitive race”. Cox (1999) observes that

Kashpaw’s [and Lame Deer’s] criticism of Hollywood’s persistent interest in the death of Native American characters suggests that in the twentieth century, mainstream media have a particular interest in producing a technological landscape defined by the conquest, that is the absence of Native Americans. (p. 234)

To play simulated Indians, Hollywood even bred Italians who look like Indians, so they would not need Indian actors any more (ibid.: 235).

In *Reservation Blues*, Indian youths like Victor are convinced that TV or film versions of Noble Savages should be what they emulate, yet they do not know that those images are merely stereotypes and simulations. When they emulate these images, they “have become reflections of the reflections that have been brought to them by the media-oriented, postmodern cinematic society” (cited in Smith, 2001: 116).

Indians have been regarded by whites as an inferior race, who are meant to vanish and greatly cashed in on. In *Reservation Blues*, Indians are willing to mix with whites but they are scorned, prejudiced against, and exploited. Reservation cops, who are often whites or have a large quantum of white blood, bully the Indians. On the reservation, the nephew (Michael White Hawk) of the Tribal Council President, David WalksAlong, is such a bully to the Indians. Although Checkers are eager to be a white girl and mix with white girls, she was unfairly treated. She tells Father Arnold:

I wanted to be just like them, those white girls, and I’d follow them around town while Mom and Dad shopped... I don’t know. I just looked at that blond hair and blue eyes and knew I wanted to look like that. (Alexie, 1995: 140).

Conspicuously, the Indian characters have totally lost faith in their own ethnicity and completely fallen for the white values.

3.3 Concealment of Real Crime

Religion and the church have become a cloak, under the beautiful illusion of which the whites' oppression is still taking place. When Father James, the white priest on the reservation, brings his nieces to the Flathead Reservation, and when the Warm Water sisters and the nieces help with Communion together, in the storage closet, the nieces push Checkers over, causing her to drop the wine, which spills all over the floor and Checkers's best dress, and the nieces start laughing. Yet, when Father James comes running to see what has happened, the nieces start "crying like babies" and "They told Father James that Chess and I'd been messing around and dropped the bottles" (Alexie, 1995: 141). Father James severely scolds Chess and Checkers and never lets them help with Communion again. Clearly seen is the fact that the white nieces, though young, propend to resort to physical violence and are good at telling lies. They do not take Indian girls as equals and are somewhat vicious.

The beautiful looking whites are actually quite evil in the name of charity and civilization; they are actually acting abominably. When Chess and Checkers go to see the nieces off at the train station, they "wouldn't even look at us" (ibid.). Having their perfect white dresses on and looking like angels, they are beautiful in appearance but disdainful in character. As Chess and Checkers are told by Father James to hug the nieces, the "big one pinches [Checkers's] breast, [her] little nipple. Nobody sees it at all. It hurts so bad, and [Checkers] start[s] to cry" (ibid.: 142). Inflicting great pain on another person, the nieces are able to get away with it by getting on the train and leave. Father James thinks that Checkers cries for reluctance to let the nieces go. Father James is the authority and has the power to decide who is right and who is wrong.

From the above instances, it can be seen that some whites still do not take Indians as equal human beings. They assume a discriminatory attitude and seek vicious means. Indians mean well but often have to endure and grieve over these bitter experiences, as authority for "justice", here represented by the church, lies elsewhere.

4. COMMERCIAL OPPRESSION AND EXPLOITATION

Now that the Indians have been robbed of all their land, the whites have thought of a new way to exploit them: commercial exploitation. In *Reservation Blues*, the Indian band, Coyote Springs, is thwarted by the white prejudice, oppression, and exploitation, which is manifested in their unfair treatment by the whites and the unsuccessful audition with the Cavalry Records. Racial oppression in the twentieth century has assumed a new form: commercial oppression and exploitation.

4.1 Commercial Oppression

Whites now oppress Indians by denying them job or career opportunities. In the case of the Indian band, Coyote Springs, the person who has the absolute power is Mr. Armstrong (reincarnation of George Armstrong Custer of the famous "Last Stand"). When the band falters at an audition in the Cavalry Records recording studio in New York, he arbitrarily determines that he is not going to give the band another chance:

Mr. Armstrong rose from his seat, adjusted his tie and jacket.

"They don't have it," Armstrong said.

"Don't you think you're being a little hasty, sir?" Wright asked.

"No, I don't," Armstrong said and left.

(Alexie, 1995: 226)

With these words, Mr. Armstrong "effectively ends the recording career of Coyote Springs" (Grassian, 2005: 95).

In a society where the power hierarchy favors the white, the minorities, Indians in this case, cannot determine their own fate. They are kept on the reservations (or urban reservations, or mental reservations for that matter) in isolation, enduring the hardships and despondence. They hardly have any chance for success.

4.2 Commercial Exploitation

Whites not only deny Indians job opportunities, but they exploit the Natives whenever there is profit. The Indians are usually kept on reservations, but if they are taken off the reservation, they leave for the whites' benefit. Examples are the live Indian specimens in museums for white audiences, especially newly arrived immigrants.

In *Reservation Blues*, when Phil Sheridan and Richard Wright invite Coyote Springs for an audition and a possible contract, they are thinking of their own profit, i. e. the profit of Cavalry Records. In the fax Sheridan and Wright send from Wellpinit, they evaluate the whole band and analyze every member with speculative marketing strategies, all of which are aimed at attracting more audience. They say that both Checkers and Chess are attractive to men, but they also debase them as "Sort of that exotic animalistic woman thing" (Alexie, 1995: 190). This familiar/exotic and human/animalistic dichotomy reveals how the talent scouts are gazing at the Indian Other. They say that "Junior Polatkin is only average on drums but a very good-looking man. Very ethnically handsome. He should bring teenage girls, which will make up for the looks of Builds-the-Fire and Joseph" (ibid.: 190). Then they give the overall assessment:

Overall, this band looks and sounds Indian. They all have dark skin. Chess, Checkers, and Junior all have long hair. Thomas has a big nose, and Victor has many scars. We're looking at some genuine crossover [mixed] appeal.

We can really dress this group up, give them war paint, feathers, etc., and really play up the Indian angle. I think this band could prove to be very lucrative for Cavalry Records. (ibid.: 190)

If their crossover attraction theory is grudgingly justifiable, their war-paint-and-feathers idea is outrageously stereotypical, which starkly exposes their greediness for and exploitation of genuine Indians with simulated ones. In other words, this is a new war, in which the whites are in power and seek for their own profit at the expense of a disadvantaged and unprivileged race

or ethnic group. Alexie suggests that “the cold-blooded manipulation of certain non-Natives continues in a new kind of war in the business world and entertainment industry, both of which are dominated by whites” (Grassian, 2005: 94). When Sheridan strikes a deal with Betty and Veronica, the wannabes/ groupies with the minute amount of Indian blood, he warns them, “you do things for us, we can do things for you. It’s a partnership. We want you to have everything you ever wanted. That’s the business we’re in. The dream business. We make dreams come true...” (Alexie, 1995: 272). Thereby, the wannabes substitute Coyote Springs. “By using tanning booths, plastic surgery, and costumes, the company seeks to remodel Betty and Veronica into an ‘Indian’ band which can be exploited and controlled” (Jorgensen, 1997: 21). Cavalry Records has appropriated the idea of the authentic Indian band Coyote Springs and offered the audience fakes or simulations. Jorgensen observes, “In the job market, Indians are exploited and the better opportunities are given to those with the least amount of Indian blood” (1997: 24). This nasty deed also exposes the superficiality of American pop culture.

4.3 Racial Stereotype

In the process of commercial oppression, the whites have assumed many a racial stereotype. The record that Betty and Veronica send Thomas is replete with stereotyped Indian images: Father Sky, Mother Earth, four directions, tobacco, pipe, sweetgrass, eagle, buffalo, etc. These traits are the ones that white people use to simulate authentic Indians:

Can you hear the eagle crying?
Can you hear the eagle crying?
I look to the four directions
And try to find some connection
With Mother Earth, Mother Earth

I offer you tobacco and sweetgrass
I offer you tobacco and sweetgrass
I pray to the four directions
And try to find some connection
With Father Sky, Father Sky
...

(Alexie, 1995: 295)

These words indicate that American popular music prefers “style/ image/ fluff over substance/content. The song itself is a hollow simulacrum of westernized Native American music (which is itself a simulacrum)” (Grassian, 2005: 98). For that matter, the whole American culture, if there is one, is a simulation. Baudrillard sees America as “a society that

thrives on the obscenity of the image, the hyperreal, and simulation” (Smith, 2001: 113). Cavalry Records, with Betty and Veronica’s first song, tries to convince the general audience that Indian culture is merely Father Sky, Mother Earth, four directions, tobacco, pipe, sweetgrass, eagle and buffalo. Sheridan and Wright, with the wannabe women, have made simulations; they have presented simulacra to the world. “[I]n America in general, reality is always inferior to imitation” (Smith, 2001: 114). Here, it applies that Coyote Springs is inferior to the substitute, the Betty and Veronica duo, creating the impression that “the simulacra on its outside represents the ‘real’” (Smith, 2001: 114). As a result, the plastic surgeries and tanning booths make people believe that Betty and Veronica are authentic Indians whereas the Coyote Springs members suffer heavy losses.

In Betty and Veronica’s song, it is also indicated that anyone can appropriate the Indian image at any time: “It don’t [*sic*] matter who you are/ You can be Indian in your bones” (Alexie, 1995: 295). White people who appropriate ethnic identity are not discriminated but could have whatever in that culture that appeals to them, which deed “further oppresses a historically underserved ethnic group by taking from them the two main things that they have left to empower themselves: their identity and culture” (Grassian, 2005: 98).

By denying Coyote Springs the opportunity to sign a contract, the white mainstream society oppresses the Indians in a new way: they have prevented the Indians from any commercial success or financial gain. By appropriating and simulating the Indian culture, they reenact, in the twentieth century, the historical scenes of usurpation. As a result of the new form of exploitation and oppression, the Indian Band, Coyote Springs, suffers from heavy casualties. Junior Polatkin kills himself on the top of the water tower. Victor Joseph indulges himself in drinking and sells his soul to “the Gentleman”. Thomas, Chess, and Checkers leave for Spokane. Andrews (2007) expresses his puzzlement about Alexie’s motivation: “What is the purpose of evoking coyote’s power but then resorting to stereotypically self-destructive Indians who absolve America of its guilt in their symbolic disappearance?” (p. 151) It is true that Coyote Springs brings hope to the reservation, and things seem to brighten up. Yet, with much dependence on the magic guitar and with the inability to resist the Gentleman’s temptation for power, the band is predestined to fail, which is also stark reality.

5. CONCLUSION

The three forms of racial oppression all appear in Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*. Military conquest now takes on the form of physical abuse and the memories still haunt the Indians. Religion has forced Indians away from their own religion, dissuaded them against their hopes of prosperity, and concealed evil intentions. Commercial oppression has become the new way of racial oppression, with the whites brandishing the sword of power and dictating terms, and making money out of the Indian culture, full of stereotypical racial biases. It is genuinely hoped that oppression cease to exist and that human beings, red or white, can tolerate one another.

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